

# DOING THEOLOGY WITH HENRI DE LUBAC

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## ABSTRACT

Henri de Lubac was one of the many theologians who have brought new dynamics in theology through his interpretation of the theology and the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. This paper wants to explore his contributions to the methods of theologizing in the church. De Lubac's interpretation of the relation between the natural and the supernatural supports the movement "Nouvelle Théologie" that appreciates the mysterious aspects of God as understood through the Christian Scriptures and traditions. According to de Lubac's interpretations of Thomas Aquinas, the seeds of the supernatural are already present in the natural within the human beings. The author argues that hermeneutics and correlation are two important methods that underlie de Lubac's ideas in putting the Scriptures as the main source of the theology insofar as the Scriptures are linked with human experience and reality. The return to theology is the return to the Scriptures and tradition, but this is always in relation to the human experiences and the contemporary world situations.

**Key Words:**

•*Neo-scholasticism* •*Nouvelle Théologie* •*The natural* •*The supernatural*  
•*Ressourcement* •*Nature* •*Potency* •*Grace* •*Anagogy* •*Experience*  
•*Tradition* •*Hermeneutics* •*Correlation*.

In the last ten years, Henri de Lubac's<sup>1</sup> works have been greatly discussed.<sup>2</sup> The issue of the nature and the supernatural—as what has been the controversy through one of his masterpieces—comes into view. This article seeks to understand de Lubac's theology by reviewing his thoughts and find out what methods he uses in doing theology. It will explore the ground of de Lubac's theology, namely the supernatural and the natural, and his exegesis. First of all I would like to delineate the context of de Lubac's time, *i.e.*, the movement of *Nouvelle Théologie*.

**The *Nouvelle Théologie***

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII wrote *Aeterni Patris* in which he insisted on the importance of Thomas Aquinas philosophy for Roman Catholic teachings. Later on, in 1917, the Code of Canon Law, promulgated by Pope Benedict XV, required that the study of philosophy and theology in all institutes of higher education, including seminaries, must be carried out according to the arguments, doctrine, and principles of St Thomas.<sup>3</sup> The philosophy of Thomas Aquinas became an official one of the Roman Catholic Church. Many theologians made efforts to discover what this philosopher had in mind when he composed the great *Summa Theologiae*. At the same time, they interpreted his thoughts. The results were, of course, a great deal of views on Thomas' philosophy (and theology).<sup>4</sup>

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the renewal in Catholic theology due to biblical patristic studies, the liturgical movement, and the ecumenical movement. De Lubac was among those theologians involved within the renewal movement.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas was the king of theology in the first half of the twentieth century. His was all honors when it came to theological discourse. The problem then was, "What kind of Thomas is it?" For Thomas' thoughts were multi-interpretable. Any theologian might see from different angles and from this created an uncanny theology for other theologians. The main stream of interpretation was that of Neo-Scholasticism, which later on was defied by the new

theology.

Neo-Scholasticism views Thomas as an Aristotelian philosopher employing a non-idealist, empirical, and *a posteriori* method who separated nature and grace.<sup>6</sup> Another group of theologians found a very different description about Thomas. This group called their approach in theology *ressourcement*. They wanted to return to the sources of Catholic theology: Scriptures and the church fathers. Some figures here were M.D. Chenu, Henri de Lubac, Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Küng, and Edward Schillebeeckx. Despite their insistence on the *ressourcement*, many labeled them under the term *Nouvelle Théologie* and it is now the name they were associated with. Their Thomas is a theologian using both Neo-Platonism and Augustinianism, integrating nature and grace through the dynamism of the human desire for God, and aware of the *a priori* elements within knowledge and faith.<sup>7</sup>

*Nouvelle Théologie* countered Neo-Scholasticism that perseveres on the importance of reason and *clara et distincta* formulations of faith. *Nouvelle Théologie* theologians would emphasize the mystery of God and faith. They explain God by saying, “*Deus, qui scitur melius nesciendo*.”<sup>8</sup> Through this statement, they are roughly stating that God is better known by nescience.

*Nouvelle Théologie* developed in France between 1940s and 1950s. The Dominican and the Jesuit schools were of great importance for this movement. De Lubac's *Le Surnaturel* was the hallmark of this new theological direction.<sup>9</sup> At that time, theology was challenged by the use of rationalistic approach towards the sacred. While Neo-Scholasticism chose to go with the flow by using reason as the tool for doing theology, *Nouvelle Théologie* picked a little bit *via negativa* emphasizing the mysterious aspects of the sacred. Yet, it in no way fell to obscurantism as it is still using the clear and distinct argument when stating the wonderful mystery of the sacred. *Nouvelle Théologie*, especially through de Lubac, seems to be using reason to deconstruct reason. It goes without saying that they sided with mysticism. Nonetheless, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the sentimental or obscure view.

In his famous *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*,<sup>10</sup> it is glass clear that de Lubac is arguing convincingly in criticizing positivist humanism. The main element in positivist humanism is the annihilation of the human person. Although he himself would like to replace the word annihilation with disintegration, the statement showed how critical he was towards the bad side of progress through reason.<sup>11</sup>

*Nouvelle Théologie* is within the scope of negative theology as it describes God for what God is not. It is not agnosticism, though. Concerning this, de Lubac cites St Augustine's words: *Non parvae notitiae pars est, cum de profundo isto in illam summitatem respiramus, si antequam scire possimus quid sit Deus, possumus iam scire quid non sit.*<sup>12</sup> Against the inclination of logicism in theology marking Neo-Scholasticism, *Nouvelle Théologie* brought something new, that is, a new way of doing theology. De Lubac is undeniably one of the main figures of this movement.

### The Supernatural<sup>13</sup>

The central idea of de Lubac's theology is the interpretation of Thomas Aquinas on the relation between the natural and the supernatural. His interpretation is one of the tedious commentaries on the natural but impracticable desire to see God according to St Thomas.<sup>14</sup> Until then, the most prominent commentary of St Thomas was Cajetan (1468-1534). It was as though one could never know what Thomas' thoughts were without referring to the works of Cajetan. However, the interpretation of Thomas by Cajetan, while forming the mainstream, was not free of criticism. Dominic Soto considered Cajetan's gloss on the *Summa* '*destruit textum*' and Macedo criticized bitterly the arbitrariness of Cajetan's commentaries.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the opponents disagreed with Cajetan's separation between the natural and the supernatural. Instead of separating the two, they stated unanimously that Thomas never separated the two. Citing Mgr. Piolanti, de Lubac says,

“...the great cardinal [Cajetan] 'separates' the two orders, natural and supernatural, in a way that completely differentiates him from St Thomas. It is in fact quite clear that in denying the created intellect any natural desire to see God...*Omnis intellectus naturaliter desiderat divinae substantiae visionem*...Cajetan was...profoundly altering its whole meaning.”<sup>16</sup>

On Cajetan's reading, dualism is inherent in Thomas view. The dualism brings about a clear demarcation between nature and grace. De Lubac defies this reading and offers his own reading, which is original and enlightening.

For him, the separation is but Cajetan's misinterpretation on Thomas bringing about the possibility of the existence of pure nature bearing within it its final end.<sup>17</sup>

Most Scholastic theologians follow Cajetan's reading. For them, the state of pure nature is

“...the reality of human nature defined by its orientation to a natural end in a state of natural beatitude...subsumed into supernatural destiny revealed to us in the Bible...natural being remained as the foundational level of our existence”<sup>18</sup>

This statement implies several points. Firstly, the human existence is mainly sustained by the pure nature, which is clearly distinct from the supernatural. Secondly, the supernatural revealed in the Bible is thus seen as an addition to human's pure nature. Thirdly, the pure nature is something “self-sufficient” and indifferent towards the supernatural. This is what Maurice Blondel calls extrinsicism.<sup>19</sup> The supernatural is something outside the realm of the natural. Against the dualism de Lubac affirmed that the only possible end for human nature is seeing God because the desire to see God is inherent in the human nature as it is a pure *desiderium naturale*, as Thomas puts it. The desire is not an addition. The desire is one with the nature and so the nature can never be separated from the supernatural.

The supernatural designates the divine order of things in its contradistinction from but in union with the human order.<sup>20</sup> De Lubac affirms that the nature and the super nature are different. The difference, though, does not mean a separation. De Lubac perceived a union between the natural and the supernatural and grace is perfecting what has been included in the nature.<sup>21</sup> Grace is not coming out of the blue interfering and adding something to human nature. It only perfects what is within human nature!

The first chapter of *The Mystery of the Supernatural* is entitled “The Ebb and Flow in Theology.” This might have shown that the interpretations of Thomas are many and from time to time theologians are grappling many ways to understand him as close as possible. For de Lubac, the theologians sometimes mistakenly understand what Thomas means.

Human has had the potency and grace is actuating the potency. Here the Bible is of great importance because it contains the words through which God, the fountain of grace and the supernatural, reveals Godself to humans. The interpretation, then, is indispensable.

## On Scriptures

The *ressourcement* has a lot to do with the Scriptures. De Lubac endeavors to understand what is revealed in the Scriptures via interpreting commentators on the Scriptures especially Origen. De Lubac's projects on the Scriptures were not primarily a study of the Scriptures. He himself states, "...not an allegorical or spiritual study of Scripture. Instead it is a work that endeavors to be an historical and literal study of the ancient commentators on Scripture."<sup>22</sup>

De Lubac starts his *Medieval Exegesis* by these words,

*"Littera gesta docet,  
quid credas allegoria,  
moralis quid agas,  
quo tendas anagogia."*

The sentence means, "The letter teaches events, allegory what you should believe, morality teaches what you should do, anagogy what mark you should be aiming for."<sup>23</sup> From this statement, there are the four senses of the Scriptures: the literal, the allegory, the moral, and the anagogical. The last three senses are the spiritual ones.

"Therefore, according to the first meaning, which is through the utterance of the words themselves, the literal or historical sense is perceived; according, however to another meaning, which is through matters as they stand in themselves, the mystical or spiritual sense is perceived, and this sense is in general threefold; because if the matter signified by the words themselves refers to the significance of what the new law enjoins us to believe, then the allegorical sense is perceived; if, moreover, the words themselves refer to the significance of how we are to act, this is the moral or tropological sense; if however, the words refer to the significance of what is to be hoped for in the way of future blessedness, this is the anagogical sense."<sup>24</sup>

The Scripture, despite its literal meaning, has to do with what we believe, what we are supposed to do, and what we hope. The literal meaning has nothing to do with the fundamental interpretation of the Scripture. Turning to the fathers of the church, de Lubac attests that theology has much to do with the Scripture. As the biblical texts remain the immediate

matter for theologians, theology is not yet, from a methodological point of view, clearly separated from exegesis.<sup>25</sup> Here again he lays emphasis on the Scriptures. Never can theology leave the Scripture, as de Lubac would put it. From the very beginning, theology and the Scripture were closely related to one another. Although there are many different views concerning the relation, it is commonly agreed that all scriptural writings are theological and there is no part of the Christian Scriptures that is not at the same time an expression of a reflective witness and a believing theology.<sup>26</sup>

De Lubac's studies on the classical commentators of the Scripture result in several accounts concerning the four senses. The *littera* in *littera gesta docet* is *historia*. *Littera* and *historia* are interchangeable.<sup>27</sup> The literal meaning has nothing to do with the fundamental interpretation of the Scripture. Instead, it refers to the interpretation of the Scripture "words by words" in accordance with the use of them at the context of the Scripture. If some phrases are metaphors, they should be understood in the metaphorical sense.

The allegorical sense deals with mystery. In daily usage, allegory is defined as "description of one thing under the image of another."<sup>28</sup> Citing Quintillian, de Lubac maintains allegory as that which points to something in words but something else in sense.<sup>29</sup> This "something else" is the mystery revealed through words. The words of the Scripture bring with themselves the revelation of God. In accordance with Peter of Poitiers picking up Bede, allegory is when mystic words or things signify the hidden mysteries of Christ and the Church.<sup>30</sup> The divine and eternal truth is revealed through the words. The Old Testament prefigures the economy of salvation with the final consummation in the mystery of the cross: the passion, the death and the resurrection of Christ. The *re-lectura* is essential then. That is, reading the OT in the light of the *mysterium paschale*.

The third sense of the Scripture is the moral or tropological sense. For de Lubac, it is necessary to draw out the moral sense of the Scriptures. The tropology here derived from tropologia, meaning speech that turns because it designates a deed of such sort that it is necessary for us to be converted to it with respect to the establishment of moral edification.<sup>31</sup> Tropology is not speech that simply conveys pure moral advice. The tropological sense is found within stories and the moral of them: the faith and obedience of Abraham, the piety of Joseph, the meekness of Moses, and the humility of David etc.<sup>32</sup>

After finding out the literal, allegorical, and moral senses, we are supposed to reach the final sense, that is, the anagogy. Right before explaining it, de Lubac asks, "Let us expand the extent of the mystery still higher; let us pursue the peaks of spiritual understanding."<sup>33</sup> Despite the confusion concerning the word anagogy, de Lubac concludes that anagogy is "a sense of the things above", "consideration from things visible to those invisible or from things below to the things above, *i.e.*, the divine things."<sup>34</sup> This definitions lead to something beyond human comprehension, something that humans will only find out what it is in the end of time. The words 'above', 'divine', and 'invisible' refer to what is beyond human conditions, which are temporal and fragile. Here we see the eschatological aspect of anagogy: eternity. Hence, anagogy brings about hope that gives humans strength to live their temporariness with conviction that something better is waiting for them. The Holy Scriptures reveal that eternity. Through the holy Scriptures, humans are able to foretaste the eternity. Every single word of the book is an opportunity to foretaste the true happiness. Words are a window through which human may see and feel the beautiful garden God has provided. What is incomprehensible is comprehensible through words. As such, anagogy is also a moment of incarnation, a moment when the divine enters into the human, a moment when the supernatural penetrates the natural as the latter has contained the "seeds" of the former.

To put it in a nutshell, I would like to quote what de Lubac beautifully writes.

"...[T]his [anagogy] will be the sense that lets one see in the realities of the earthly Jerusalem those of the heavenly Jerusalem for a certain part of the city has been made an image of the heavenly city...although ...no longer belong to time...they are things yet to come, objects of desire and of hope."<sup>35</sup>

## Methods

De Lubac has created his own theological edifice. What have been explained above are some important points of his thoughts. But what are the methods he uses? This might be a bit unreal to hear him saying, "Quite honestly, I have no special theological method, and my personal contribution to theology as far as doctrine is concerned is meager."<sup>36</sup> Is this



really true? The problem might lie in the word “special.” Not having a special method does not mean not having methods. What his methods are could be tracked down from his words in the same interview.

”...My only ambition has always been and still is to make the great Christian tradition known and loved in order that contemporary thoughts may derive nourishment from it...”<sup>37</sup>

What de Lubac is doing when theologizing is interpreting the traditions, especially of the fathers of the church, and make them the source to contemporary thoughts. From this, I would like to say that his main methods in doing theology are of hermeneutics and correlations.

Hermeneutics has in fact been used in theology for long. The Greek tradition passes the art of interpretation on to Christianity. Hermeneutics received its new and solid foundations through philosophers like Schleiermacher, Hegel, Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur. It deals with the theories of interpretation. All approaches to theology are hermeneutical insofar as they include interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Hermeneutics is in the air for many contemporary philosophers. Right after the linguistic turn, hermeneutics is put within the context of language. Existentialism brings experience as an important aspect in hermeneutics. Ricoeur's hermeneutics, for instance, is that of suspicion and at the same time retrieval. Therefore, hermeneutics is double-sided: it deconstructs and reconstructs.

How de Lubac uses this? First, he interprets the Christian tradition. For him, theological reflection is a matter of interpreting the tradition faithfully. That is why he opposes Cajetan's interpretation of Thomas. For him, Cajetan is simply constructing his own theological edifice through the writings of Thomas. Second, within the *ressourcement*, de Lubac wants to bring the depth of Christian tradition back to front. At a time when many theologians start their reflection mainly from reason, de Lubac retrieves the richness of Christian traditions. Third, de Lubac is very meticulous in doing his research in the patristic writings that von Balthasar says, “Whoever stands before the forty or so volumes of de Lubac's writings...feels as though he is at the entrance to a primeval forest.”<sup>39</sup> What is more, de Lubac deconstructs the seemingly unchangeable interpretation of Thomas and by doing that retrieves the archaic and original meaning of Thomas.

The hermeneutics further leads to correlation for interpreting a certain text includes how to put it into conversation with many other opinions from any other ideas, such as culture, contemporary philosophies and so

forth. The method of correlation in theology started when German Protestant theology sought to mediate between the traditional theological starting point of Scripture and Schleiermacher's starting points of religious experience.<sup>40</sup> The method of correlation is one that is undertaking to find the correlation between the tradition of Christian experiences and the other present day situation or between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation.<sup>41</sup> This means linking faith with experience. By faith here I mean the whole tradition of the Catholic faith and experience refers to anything that has to do with the reality of human life in the world.

Obviously, de Lubac endeavored to correlate the Christian tradition with the theologies of the 1950s. The mainstream theologies of that time seemed to be impoverishing the Catholic tradition. De Lubac demanded that theologians return to the true tradition. For him, this means unearthing the forgotten message from the patristic and mediaeval era. De Lubac addresses his theology to the modern western European people, especially the theologians influenced by modernism. Atheism and secularism prevalent there were his contexts of doing theology. His interlocutors are the modern thoughts.

His correlation is shown right in the beginning of his *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. He puts Etienne Gilson's words in it, stating, "Weighed down with the deposits of five centuries; scholasticism suffers most seriously from ignorance of itself. To revive it, let us listen to the advice of history: Return to theology!"<sup>42</sup> The *ressourcement* in this sense is 'correlation' par excellence. By moving to the past, de Lubac is progressing to the future

## End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Henri de Lubac was born on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1896 at Cambrai, French, to a noble family of the Ardèche. At the age of 27, he joined the Society of Jesus in Lyon. Two years later he had to join the army and was wounded. He was ordained on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1927. He was named in 1929 Professor of Fundamental Theology and the History of Religions in the faculty of Catholic Theology at Lyons. At the Vatican Council he was a *peritus* and a member of the Theological Commission. He died in 1991. Cf. Patrick Granfield, *Theologians at Work*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), 174.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Raymond Moloney, SJ, "De Lubac and Lonergan on the Supernatural" in *Theological Studies* vol. 69, (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2008), 509.

- <sup>3</sup> James C Livingston & Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Modern Christian Thought*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 197.
- <sup>4</sup> Thomas' was the time of the maturation of theology as an academic discipline. At that time, philosophy and theology were struggling to separate from each other. The two are more or less the same. See Francis Schüssler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *Systematic Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 18.
- <sup>5</sup> Joshep A Komonchak, Mary Collins, & Dermot A Lane (eds.), *The New Dictionary of Theology*, (Pasay City: Daughters of Saint Paul, 1991), 1034.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. James C Livingston & Francis Schüssler (eds.), *op. cit.*, 198.
- <sup>7</sup> See. *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> I find this statement in de Lubac's book. He cites St Augustine's word in *De Ordine*, 2, 16. See Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 127.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. James C Livingston & Francis Schüssler (eds.), *op. cit.*, 202.
- <sup>10</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995).
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Patrick Granfield, *op. cit.*, 171.
- <sup>12</sup> It is a part of no small knowledge, when we have emerged from this depth to breathe on that summit, if before we can know what God is we can already know what he is not. See Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 212.
- <sup>13</sup> I do not include the controversy around this theme as the opinion attributed to him by such critics would directly contrary to the teaching of Humani Generis and has always been explicitly excluded by de Lubac even before the encyclical was written. See Raymond Moloney SJ, *op. cit.*, 512.
- <sup>14</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), ix.
- <sup>15</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 10-11.
- <sup>17</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>18</sup> Raymond Moloney, SJ, *op. cit.*, 511.
- <sup>19</sup> Raymond Moloney, SJ, *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Raymond Moloney SJ, *ibid.*, 514.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 31.
- <sup>22</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis vol I*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), xiii.
- <sup>23</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 1; 271; cf. Komisi Kitab Suci Kepausan, *Penafsiran Alkitab dalam Gereja*, (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003), 104.
- <sup>24</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 271.
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *op. cit.*, 8.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Medieval Exegesis vol. II*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 41.
- <sup>28</sup> Victoria Neufeldt & David B. Guralnik, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989), 36.
- <sup>29</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Medieval Exegesis*, Vol. II, 89.
- <sup>30</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>31</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 129.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 130.
- <sup>33</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 179.

- <sup>34</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 180.  
<sup>35</sup> Henri de Lubac, *ibid.*, 180-181.  
<sup>36</sup> Patrick Granfield, *op. cit.*, 173.  
<sup>37</sup> Patrick Granfield, *ibid.*  
<sup>38</sup> Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *op. cit.*, 43. Some more details concerning hermeneutics in theology are elucidated in this book (43-47). In this article, I would like to show that de Lubac uses this approach.  
<sup>39</sup> This is what Robert Louis Wilken says in his foreword to *Medieval Exegesis vol. I*. See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis vol. I*, IX  
<sup>40</sup> Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *op. cit.*, 55  
<sup>41</sup> Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza & John P. Galvin (eds.), *ibid.*, 57-59  
<sup>42</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, viii

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